

Antonio Maria GENTILI
THE BARNABITES



**Manual of history and spirituality
of the Order of Clerics Regular
of St. Paul Beheaded**

Chapter 9

LUDOVICA TORELLI, COUNTESS OF GUASTALLA

Birth of the Countess of Guastalla

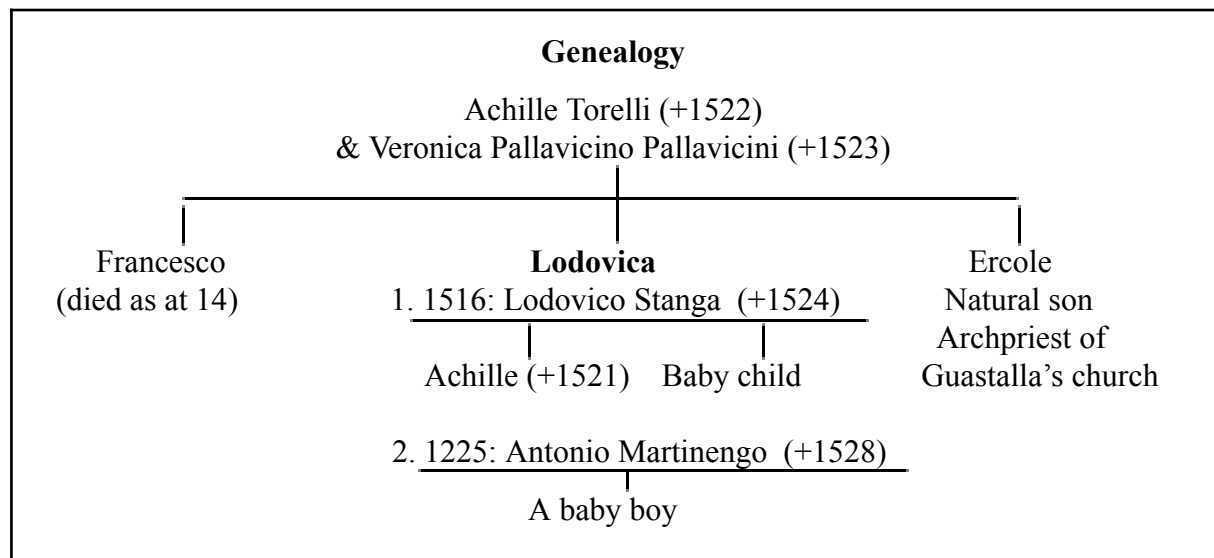
Guastalla is a small town on the south bank of the Po River about 130 km SE of Milan and 70 km SE of Cremona, in a region of quasi-independent feudal princedoms and counties.

Ludovica Torelli was the Countess of Guastalla, and is the foundress of the Angelic Sisters together with St. Anthony M. Zaccaria, and she also had a share in the founding of the Barnabites.

The attractive, energetic, and keen-minded Ludovica was born on September 24, 1499 by the Count Achille and Veronica Pallavicini who educated her in arts and in piety, favored by the child's character, described by the historians as "magnanimous" (a great heart) and "happy to make others happy."

We know nothing precise of this woman's childhood except that she left a long and luminous trail of goodness and that she was kindhearted; in fact, the Gesuite Fr. Morigia writes that "since her childhood she would hide grain and bread under her skirts for the poor."

In 1515, at the death of her 14 years old brother Francesco, she became the only heir to the little State of Guastalla. According to her social condition and the customs of the time, she had a refined education aimed at developing the precious talents of mind and heart with which she was endowed. It was known that this child was to inherit not only her father's rich patrimony and jurisdiction, but even that of other relatives; she was therefore trained to be not only a competent woman but one capable of governing.



Death of her father

It was not long before she had to assume responsibility. She had hardly reached adolescence when she was orphaned by her father's assassination in 1522, at the hand of Ercole Gonzaga during a celebration in Rocca di Novellara.

This trauma, the first of a long series, deeply affected Ludovica's tender and affectionate mind. "Even at an advanced age she tearfully recalled this unexpected death and feared for her father's salvation."

It is difficult to ascertain the motive of the crime and the year of Count Torelli's death. Conflict of interests with neighbors may have been the reason. They were flanked by the Gonzagas who later tried to buy the property from the Countess.

Ludovica's government

The young lady administered her vast possessions with such skill that she succeeded not only in preserving them but in adding to them. Nor did her mother make the task easier. Since she was a "devout woman and more dedicated to God than to the world," she gladly left the burden of government to her daughter.

In spite of her youth, Ludovica "was endowed with an admirable ability and an invincible spirit. She showed great prudence and shrewdness in handling affairs so that her dependents loved her very much. She was mentally alert and physically attractive and endowed with great beauty."

First marriage

Her combination of talents proved to be hazardous to the kind of life she had to lead so that every day she became freer in conversation, more vain in her dress and more ambitious in governing. Her mother and other relatives thought it time that this charming girl be placed under the protection of a mature man. When she was about 18, probably toward the end of 1517, she married Ludovico Stanga, a descendant of one of the more outstanding families of Cremona. Shortly after, her mother died. This sorrow was mitigated by the birth of her first child. The future heir was named Achille after her father.

Count Stanga becomes ill

She had not been married a year when Count Ludovico Stanga became gravely ill and stiffened with gout. When the pain was not too intense he would gamble large sums which he usually lost. When he lost he would become despondent; to give vent to his anger, he would abuse his wife. She had the double cross of seeing her fortune dwindle and herself abused. However, everyone marveled at how she served her husband with much kindness and patience. She did not mind the humblest chores and medicating his wounds. Another child was born to the Stangas but did not survive in the sullen atmosphere.

Ludovica remains a widow

The count died soon after so that in the brief period of three years the young bride suffered three losses: 1521, her son Achille; 1522, her father Achille; 1523, her mother Veronica; 1524, her husband.

The young wealthy widow aroused the envy of her relatives, the Torelli of Montechiarugolo, who unjustly presumed a share of her considerable wealth. These relatives were so deceitful and threatening that she was compelled to go armed and "accompanied by several braves for protection."

Second marriage

To prevent these dangers she was advised, especially by some Milanese gentlemen and by the Duke himself to remarry. Finding their proposal justified she agreed to take a husband. Among the various aspirants was Count Anthony Martinengo of Brescia, first army captain of the Venetian Republic. Because of his nobility and the great authority he enjoyed in the Republic she could, under his patronage, protect her wealth and property, not only against the threat of relatives but against wars and other calamities which often beset the Milanese. Her main reason for the choice was that he was rather old and she felt it was more prudent to entrust herself to him and thus protect her youth. She married him in 1525.

In the early days of their marriage, Martinengo was very considerate of his wife, especially when she bore him a charming boy who would have inherited his fiefs. When the child died a few months later and he lost hope of another child, his love for the Countess weakened. He was in fact a very violent man and had killed his first wife of the Somaglia family who had given him three children.

He was often rude and threatening towards the Countess, in an effort to make her give her possessions to his son, Jerome, by his first marriage. He even went so far as “to put a dagger to her throat and to chase after her through the house with a sword.” The Countess lived in this state until the relatives of his first wife struck him down leaving Ludovica widowed again at the age of 24. She took good care of the children Anthony had had from his previous wife, and took with her to Guastalla one of his daughters, Bianca, who later will become an Angelic.

A widow again

Relieved of her brutal spouse, she seemed to want to forget her marital misfortunes resuming with a vengeance the gay life of her court. Moral constraints were few and weak; opportunities for self-indulgence many and compelling. Some authors probably exaggerate this period of her life to draw a greater contrast, but although she was worldly, she was not necessarily dissolute. From a human viewpoint, it is logical that Ludovica, who was beautiful, young, and intelligent, should use her charm and her wealth to enjoy the pleasures she had so long been denied.

A maternal relative, Clara Pallavicino of Busseto, was sometimes a guest. Seeing that she was so young and free, she feared for her eternal salvation. She put in a good word from time to time. She introduced her to Madonna Brunetta, who was noted for her sanctity, but Ludovica was not immediately impressed by her.

To be sure, Guastalla had a chaplain, a Fr. Peter Orsi. However, it is fair to assume that Ludovica considered him, not so much a spiritual adviser, but just another member of her court and a functionary of her county. Likewise, it is fair to assume that the practice of religion at the court of Guastalla was generally perfunctory.

However, subsequent events will show that during all these years of self-gratification, Ludovica was no more than a victim, however willing, of distressing circumstances. A vehement character she would not go halfway in anything she undertook, and she had pretty much run the whole gamut of worldly pleasures. But the well-educated and gifted Ludovica had yet to find her true identity and definitive way of life. The core of her rich personality remained uncommitted. Possibly, she began to realize the emptiness of her life-style: excitement did not equate with fulfillment; hedonism was not substitute for love.

Sometime in 1529, she was about to go hunting (her preferred form of entertainment) with a retinue of courtesans and guests. Realizing it was Sunday, she ordered her chaplain to celebrate a quick Mass. Disgusted with the dissolute life of the small court, Fr. Orsi offered the Holy Sacrifice, but with all the calm and composure required by the sacred rite. The indignant Countess angrily threatened to dismiss him. Unexpectedly, Father Orsi retorted that the attitude of the Countess was plainly childish and irrational. The frank reaction of her chaplain had the effect of bringing Ludovica to her senses. Quite embarrassed, she promised to take her religion more seriously. Recognizing the danger to her soul, the Countess decided to make a break with her worldly life and to lead an entirely new one. She turned to the Dominican Friars whom she had known through Clara Pallavicino.

Ludovica's conversion

The turning point was in 1529, when she went to Milan to defend her rights over the insidious machinations by her relatives, and by luck or the grace of God, in the church of Sta. Maria delle Grazie, she went to confession to Fra Battista Carioni da Crema, who was able to convert her. But all those who knew her, could not believe it, or they thought that it would not last. Ludovica, instead, to symbolize and authenticate, as it were, her change of heart, she went to the extent of taking the name Paula after the apostle Paul, Fra Battista's favorite saint. This theory is supported by notary acts dating from 1530 on. She also obtained from the Superiors of the Dominican Order to take with her to Guastalla Fra Battista as her spiritual director. On November 12, 1529, as the permission by the Dominicans was coming to an end, she obtained from the Pope to keep him in Guastalla for an undetermined period of time.

Thus begins the second phase of the Countess' life. From that moment on she decided to consecrate to the Lord not only her life and person, but all her possessions. As proof of her complete dedication to the service of God and neighbor she committed herself to works of piety and charity.

Obviously willing, capable, and affluent, could Paula Ludovica Torelli not become a great asset in the world of religious reform? The aging reformer was not about to forego this providential opportunity. Within the next two years, facing the displeasure of his confreres but with formal authorization (July 10, 1531), Fra Battista took up residence in Ludovica's palace. Incidentally, Guastalla was not part of any diocese.

Soon after their meeting, in the early part of 1530, at Battista's urging, Ludovica went with him to Milan, purchased a house near the church of St. Ambrose, and set about to gather a group of religious-minded women, married and single, with a disposition for charitable work.

On their return to Guastalla, Battista and Ludovica spent some time in Cremona. Fra Battista wanted to introduce to Ludovica his most promising protégé, Anthony M. Zaccaria. Would the dedicated young priest not make an excellent chaplain for Guastalla and eventually a valuable partner in Milan in the work of reform? Ludovica heard Anthony Mary preach in the church of St. Vitale. The well born woman could not fail to appreciate the innate refinement of Anthony Mary's bearing, his healthy though somewhat delicate features (he was born prematurely), the handsome oval of his face, his striking eyes, his black hair and eyebrows, his thick, dark beard. But it was his manner of preaching that impressed her most.

Anthony Mary joins Fra Battista and the Countess

Except for Fra Battista's recommendations and Anthony Mary's pastoral eloquence, Ludovica might very well have found Anthony Mary quite appealing for personal reasons. They were practically the same age, Anthony Mary 28, Ludovica 30. The young patrician, who radiated virginal innocence and intense earnestness, appeared an ideal partner to the former merry widow in her newly found Christian life. She certainly could look upon him as a brother since they both shared the same spiritual father, Fra Battista. Whatever the precise reasons, the fact is that shortly after their first meeting in Cremona, Anthony Mary joined Fra Battista and Ludovica in Guastalla. Fra Battista remained Ludovica's confessor and spiritual advisor. Anthony Mary assumed the duties of her county's chaplaincy in addition to becoming Ludovica's personal legal advisor.

In Cremona, through his concern for people in distress, Anthony Mary had acquired some legal experience. On their behalf he undertook tedious legal proceedings. One case concerned a Lucia Stropi, natural daughter of Giovanni Stropi, a gentleman from Cremona. As his only surviving trustee and executor, Anthony Mary provided for Lucia's legitimization, adoption, and marriage. At the same time he managed the financial affairs of Veronica Panevino, widowed sister-in-law of Giovanni Stropi. Anthony Mary saw to it that her minor son, John Francis, received his whole inheritance. He did so by effecting the removal of all restricting clauses contained in John's will. It goes without saying that this type of activity required countless time-consuming appearances before the Prince, his assistants, the Count Palatine, the chief magistrate, his lieutenant, and the criminal judge, all residing in Cremona.

That people placed their personal and family affairs in the hands of a young cleric attested to his prudence, trustworthiness, and ability. It seems quite remarkable that Ludovica chose Anthony Mary as her legal advisor instead of her own half-brother, Ercole, the most prominent priest in Guastalla. (Another common trait between Anthony Mary and Ludovica was that both had a sibling born out of wedlock, a half-sister and a half-brother, respectively).

No doubt capitalizing on the spiritual affinity of his two young disciples, the aging Fra Battista lost no time in returning to Milan with Anthony Mary and Ludovica. He did so in the same year, 1530.

As said above, at first Ludovica bought a house next to St. Ambrose, which then she gave to the Barnabites, as she moved to a better one at St. Eufemia. The new church built on the site was dedicated to St. Paul the Converted, where they started the recitation of the Divine Office the following year. The young Sisters, in white habit, were called Angelics: "since they had selected an angelic name, they were aware to have to lead a corresponding life; to be able to do this they started to feed themselves daily with the food of Angels: a favor granted at that time only to people of proved perfection" (Rosignoli. S.J., *Life and Virtues of the Countess of Guastalla*).

The first persecutions

Meanwhile Torelli's relatives realized that with this institute all their hopes of inheriting her wealth were going up in smoke. They launched every type of persecution and calumny because of Ludovica's humble deeds, and her excessively modest way of dressing which they considered an insult to the family.

On the other hand, there were some self-righteous people who, under the pretext of zeal, or cowardly interest, accused the Countess and company to the Senate and magistrates of Milan as well as the Archbishop, who was busy with everything but the Diocese. “However, the Vicars who had little or nothing to do, made this an important issue.”

The trial

The Countess was anxious to clarify her position so as to prevent these calumnies from negatively influencing her request to the Pontiff for approval. She felt it necessary to expedite the trial and obtain a verdict which would “bring peace and quiet and satisfy the Apostolic See.”

The trial was to start on October 5, 1534. The ecclesiastical phase was entrusted to the Vicar Msgr. Toti, and to the Inquisitor Melchor Crivelli; the judicial phase, to Senator Francis Casati. The previous day, feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Zaccaria, like an expert pilot who was sure of his course, warmly exhorted his followers to persevere in this moment of trial.

This exhortation was reported almost verbatim by Fr. Gabuzio who had heard it from Fr. Soresina, an eye witness. The Sisters are not named but it is doubtful that he excluded his dear daughters from the meeting. It would have been unfair to exclude them, since even they had the right to suffer for the name of Christ. When Fr. Gabuzio transcribed the exhortation, too many motives had cropped up to induce him to exclude them. However, it is very likely that if the Father Founder deemed it opportune to hold a meeting just for the clerics, he would have held another for his favored daughters.

Favorable verdict

When the accusations were examined it was found that the defendants were being accused only of excessive humility and devotion. When the suspicions were exposed as false and the opinions as not worthy of consideration, the trial was suspended. Only then did the detractors submit. The Carmelite friar who had started this investigation asked pardon as the instigator of these accusations.

The suspension of the trial did not fully satisfy the Company. The Countess wanted a definitive verdict and the trial was resumed on August 20, 1537. This resulted in a favorable verdict and much satisfaction, and, as attested by the historians, it was received with great relieve by the whole city of Milan.

We know that the acts of the trial were gathered in two volumes to show that the tribunal had listened to all possible witnesses, but unfortunately they have been lost. Fr. Fontana explains: The Barnabites knew of the existence of a copy of these acts in the archives of the Inquisition in St. Mary's of Grace in Milan; when this was about to be suppressed, they sent someone to make a copy. This person started to copy the *Processum dominae Vastallae mini 1536*, but stopped thinking to be the wrong one. When the Fathers realized that that was the document they needed, it was too late since everything had been burned by the Inquisition.

St. Paul, the protector

We know that Zaccaria was a fervent admirer and imitator of St. Paul and that the Countess Torelli had taken St. Paul as her patron from the very beginning of her conversion and had even taken his name. Even Sr. Paola A. Negri, whose star was beginning to rise, was

equally enthusiastic. She had memorized all of St. Paul's letters. There was, therefore, little discussion and they unanimously agreed to dedicate their work to St. Paul. They noted that, among the others, this apostle shone like a furnace burning with love of God by whom he had been made an elect vessel of grace. Since he was, at the same time, concerned with brotherly love, it seemed best to take him as patron and model.

The mission in Vicenza (1537-1551)

In 1537 the Countess Torelli together with some Angelics took part in the Vicenza mission. She went to visit the religious house with Sr. Frances Bona from Castiglione (the only Dominican from St. Lazarus who had remained at St. Paul) and Father Francis Lecco. She found it profitable to accept the responsibility and stayed there until joined by other members from Milan destined for the mission. On July 2, the Founder left for Vicenza with Sr. Paula Antonia Negri, Silvana of Vismara, and Madonna Francesca of Marescalca. The Founder probably accompanied his daughters only part of the way because he had to return immediately to Milan on pressing business. He returned in September with Parzia Negri and may have delayed about a month since, according to some legal proceedings, he was back in Milan the following November.

The Vicenza mission lasted until 1551. Although the ban of February 21 of that year imposed on the Company of St. Paul the departure from all Venetian territory within 15 days, they were still there on December 24, 1551 directing one of the monasteries. Having been called to Vicenza by ecclesiastic rather than by civil authorities, they could delay. The consoling fruits of this mission improved the morals of clergy and people. Religious disciplines flourished again in the monasteries.

Several nobles who attended the conferences asked to enter the Company of St. Paul. Married people joined the Congregation of Married Couples. They lived with so much edification and benefit to their neighbor that they rendered great service to God.

Verona mission (1542)

News of the good accomplished in Vicenza by the Company of St. Paul led the endowed and zealous Bishop of Verona, John Matthew Giberti, to make insistent requests for the Barnabites and the Sisters to work with the people of his diocese.

For this undertaking three noble women were delegated: Julia Sfrondati, and the two matrons Severina da Roverini of Pavia and Polissena Scrosati of Milan. They arrived in Verona, January 15, 1542 accompanied by Ferrari and other sisters. The Countess Torelli visited this mission too. No one knows how long the sisters remained in Verona, but probably until the ban of 1551.

Venice mission (1543-1551)

It was hardly two years that the Veronese mission was open when some outstanding citizens of Venice came to know of the work in Vicenza and Verona and wanted these missionaries, so esteemed by such illustrious pastors as Cardinal Ridolfi and Bishop Giberti.

Around the close of 1543 or the beginning of 1544, a committee from the hospitals of Sts. John and Paul went to Milan to ask the Countess and Father Ferrari, who was superior at the time, to assume the reform and government of all the charitable institutions of the city of

Venice. The Countess procrastinated quite a bit before accepting this new and not easy undertaking, but under pressure, especially from some Clerics of St. Paul of Venetian origin, she could not resist the entreaties and conceded.

On February 3, 1544, Torelli left with a group of sisters, a widow of Casale and the Fathers Dionysius da Sesto and Jerome Marta. To those areas, “with the help of the Lord and their indefatigable industry” they brought back in an orderly manner the peace and quiet so necessary to good government. In a short time in localities adjacent to the hospital, numerous associations were organized for the edification of outsiders. At first the meetings were chaired by the Countess but she was replaced by Sr. Paula Antonia Negri who assumed their direction. With the reputation of her sanctity she succeeded in leading many souls to Christ.

There was thus a great revival of promising spirituality and these souls, who a short time before had dedicated themselves to worldly pleasures, now competed in doing good.

Several matrons of illustrious families became humble helpers of the Sisters, and later appreciated the Congregation so much that they gave it the finest gift, their own daughters, who became Sisters. Other young ladies, touched by their example, begged their parents to allow them to consecrate themselves to God in that institute. However, parents were reticent in allowing their daughters to leave home and country. They were planning to build a new monastery for the Sisters in Venice which would be dependent on the one in Milan. In 1549 Torelli revisited Venice to insure that the mission was carrying on with the spirit in which it had been started. She was very pleased with the work of her daughters.

Converted devotees of the Crucified (1545)

The missions outside Milan did not deter the Countess from taking care of the needs of her adopted country which had given birth to the Company of St. Paul. In 1545 she assumed the direction of a convent of converted devotees. It had been abandoned by everyone because of its poverty and previous disorders. In fact, the converts who lived there dressed miserably in sackcloth and were undernourished, since the work they did was not sufficient to maintain them.

The Countess assigned Parzia Negri, to govern these converts. Encouraged by their notable improvement, the Countess built them a new house with a public church dedicated to the Crucified Lord and St. Mary of Egypt. Because of this, some authors consider her to be the foundress of this monastery.

The Ferrara mission (1548)

The Duchess Renata of France, having joined the Protestant movement, had attracted to the city of Ferrara many Lutherans and Calvinists. Her husband, Hercules II d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, decided to invite some religious to come to Ferrara to reform some penitent women of the Order of St. Clare who were really in need of conversion. He repeatedly approached the Countess Torelli to accept this new work of reform.

The Countess and the other members of the Company realized the full responsibility of this undertaking and only after much prayer were induced to accept. On October 6, 1548, the Countess left for Ferrara accompanied by Sr. Priscilla Visconti, superior, and Srs. Ignatia and Martha Cremonesi. Father Peter Michel, a Venetian, went along to attend as confessor.

When the affairs of the monastery were organized they were able to begin their external apostolate. What must have been the consolation of the sisters when they saw the

courtiers and followers of the duchess joining the volunteers. The sisters' mission in Ferrara lasted until 1553 when they were all called to St. Paul's in Milan where the cloistered life had been introduced.

Troubles in Venice

It was in Venice that in 1550 the Countess Torelli came under suspicion by the Venetian leaders.

On October 3, 1538 with the help of Mr. Constance D'Adda, Countess Torelli finalized the sale of the Fief of Guastalla to Ferrante Gonzaga, Governor of Milan. The Countess seized every opportunity to help souls. The lengthy negotiations served to enhance a cordial friendship between the Countess and the Gonzaga couple. When the Duke had to absent himself from Milan because of his duties as Captain General to His Majesty, his wife Cesarea could find no greater solace than to retreat to the monastery. During these sojourns Venetian ladies passing through on the way to Milan would stop to visit her and noted the intimate friendship between the Princess of Molfetta and the Countess.

In the notes of Fr. Gabuzio's *History*, Fr. Mazenta states that the sale of Guastalla was frowned upon by the Venetian ruling class since that district was a fortification on the Po River. Gonzaga, who was a liege of Paul V, could have prevented the passage of Venetian ships. Furthermore, since several Venetian young ladies had become Sisters, a malicious rumor spread that the dowry which they brought to St. Paul would in the long run damage the economy of the Republic.

Certainly not last and not less effective were the detractors. Some, who were annoyed because their evil ways were censured or because they were deprived of their coveted victims, did not hesitate to spread the strangest and most ridiculous calumnies about the Sisters. Fr. Premoli justly writes that our people, with the animated zeal, characteristic of neophytes and converts, tried to put a stop to the spread of heresy and evil ways; however, they were naive in their new life. In fact, ever-ready to accept every form of good which came their way, they were not equally prudent in protecting themselves from the dangers which might come with it.

The relationship between the Sisters and the Clerics was undoubtedly intimate and frequent. As natural as it was, it could raise suspicions of scandal and evil. The two Congregations were established by the same Founder, maintained by the wealth of the same benefactress, in the early days they lived in the same house or neighboring houses, they were asked by the Bishop to undertake the same acts of charity in their dioceses; consequently, they formed a single religious family. Because of this, nothing helped to prevent the suspicions of those who saw evil in everything - neither the good done by the Sisters in the reform of monasteries, nor the commendations of renowned Bishops, not the indefatigable zeal of the Fathers, nor the uprightness and austerity of the life of both.

Will of politicians

For all the reasons given, the governors of Venice did not look favorably on our people who urged frequent confession. They feared that this was a way of extorting state secrets so as to communicate these to the Emperor through Gonzaga. They used this stupid gossip to put them in a bad light with the people and to justify their machinations against them. They were joined by politicians who were happy to have the opportunity to defy the

Holy See authoritatively as well as the secret partisans of the new ideas in Germany who hoped thus to snatch souls from the Catholic Church.

To these reasons can be added the well known propensity of the Venetian Republic to take offense for the slightest thing, and one can understand how a single act considered discourteous by them would suffice to make them take a decided and precipitous action.

Fatal incident

Sr. Paula Antonia Negri, who had been in Venice since 1545, was esteemed and revered by all as a saint. Her numerous spiritual children, to express their devotion, did not hesitate to pay her homage, kneeling before her to ask her blessing. These acts of homage, often paid by illustrious persons, were repugnant to her humility and disturbed her interiorly. To evade these, she sometimes had to be rather discourteous as to stand aloof decidedly or openly show that she did not appreciate these acts. Fr. Premoli reports that one day a noble Venetian patrician, James Foscarini, asked to speak with her. He was strongly rebuffed. The hurt to his pride became the cause of war.

Outraged by this affront, he suddenly changed the great esteem he felt for Sister into bitter rancor and desire for revenge. With many pretexts and much intrigue he had presented to the Senate a memorial in which he requested the expulsion of Sr. Negri and her entire Company not only from Venice, but from all Venetian territory.

We do not have the text of the memorial, but from indirect sources we can assume that suspicions were spread about these foreign men and women: more spies were sent to Venice by Prince Gonzaga. They were immediately told to leave Venetian territory within fifteen days without giving them the opportunity to clear themselves. It was February 21, 1551.

A further study of the situation

Fr. Premoli writes: ‘The good accomplished by the Fathers and the Angelics in Vicenza and in Verona aroused the desire for them in Venice too. The esteem in this city for a Cardinal Ridolfi and a Bishop Giberti was more than enough to move the Venetians to desire those workers who enjoyed the great esteem of so illustrious Prelates.’ After the foundation of the monastery of St. Paul in Milan in 1536, the sisters, now called Angelics, reached 25 members in that first year, having received the approval of Paul III to live in community under the rule of St. Augustine. We know that Ludovica Torelli used to reside there, having made “secretly a promise of obedience” - that is, without pronouncing public vows - as suggested by Paola Antonia Negri, the Mistress of novices, convinced that “it was much better for me to keep dressing as a widow instead of as a nun, and so it was never in my mind nor of the Father nor of the Mother of the monastery for me to become a nun” (1554 letter by the Countess to “Doctor Michel Tomaso”). The unquestioned spiritual Father of the Countess, Fra Battista da Crema, had convinced her to “never become a nun, because the Lord wanted to use me” in another way (*ibid*). The Countess, therefore, was called to a vocation larger than cloistral life, free from the strict observances of regular life that she was drawing up for others; a vocation which allowed her, with the humble habit of a widow, to administer her estate in Guastalla and also to enjoy more freedom in her action as a “foundress,” nothing different from other famous pious Ladies of the time, like for example Vittoria Colonna.

It was exactly to try new foundations, or better, new branches of the Pauline community in Milan, that Torelli travelled, often in the company of the first Barnabites,

whom Anthony M. Zaccaria, until his death, would gladly entrust to her, in various city in North Italy, and this so much more after his death (1539). It was then that she was able to sell her Guastalla fief to Ferrante Gonzaga.

Between 1543 and 1545 the Countess traveled between Padua and Venice to try to open new foundations in those important cities. As for Venice both Torelli and the Barnabites had much more hope because a delegation from the Hospital of "Saints John and Paul" had begged them to offer their well experienced work at the service of those sick people. And so, probably at the end of 1543, Torelli - and with her the Barnabite Fathers Dionisio da Sesto and Gerolamo Marta, as said above - left Padua for Venice, where we find them at work in January 1545.

The Countess' "Magisterium"

One of the letters by Cardinal Alexander Farnese (nephew of Paul III) to the Nuncio in Venice, Giovanni Della Casa (he was pontifical Nuncio in Venice from 1503 to 1556), is dated January 10, 1545: "Our Lord, you understand that the Countess of Guastalla, having left her new monastery already opened in Milan, goes around the cities preaching dogmas, not without scruples and scandal for the religion, and that at this time she must be over there, following this institution. Therefore, since the mentioned Countess is now in Venice, His Holiness has entrusted Your Lordship to be alert to deal with her in such an able way so as to convince her and to warn her not to want to follow, as a woman, on this road and around cities and villages, for the reasons that Your Lordship on your own will know worthy to adduce for this purpose, keeping us informed of what in this office you decide to do. And in case she is not there, Your Lordship will find ways and means to find out where she is and what she is teaching on this subject."

This letter by Cardinal Farnese helps to understand why the Roman Curia (better yet, the Holy Office, or Inquisition) was looking at the initiatives of the Countess Torelli. After the accusation of 1536, "to belong to a certain sect, started by a certain Battista da Crema [...] containing many heresies condemned by the Church...", and the relative trial by Cardinal Morone and Beccadelli until 1537, concluded with an absolution for the Countess, she was anyway followed if not with suspicion for sure with worries. It seems that we can infer from the tone of the letter that the accusation this time was not coming from Venice (the Cardinal says that he does not know if she resides there), and it is difficult to say from where, while the ground for it is very clear: the preaching done, without any scruple, by the Countess.

We know how important it was at the beginning of the Barnabites and of the Angelics (and not only for them) the fundamental "charism" of preaching to the people, which will become at the same time a religious obligation and a proof of the genuineness of the Pauline vocation and of the spiritual profit. In Venice as in Vicenza, in Padua, in Milan and wherever, Barnabites and Angelics (think of Negri) would preach in public, "open seminars" were held with the participation of lay people and clergy, and often with the participation of the local aristocracy from which - see the case - many vocations will come to the Barnabites and to the Angelics. But that a woman, and a widow like the Countess of Guastalla (she kept the title also after the sale of her fief) will go around to preach (spread dogmas) in various cities, seemed to Paul III and his closer collaborators (aware, perhaps, of the 1537 trial) to cause "scruple and scandal of religion."

Pressure from the Nuncio

This is why the pressure from Rome to the Nuncio in Venice became stronger: “Your Lordship,” Cardinal Farnese writes again on January 31, 1545, to Della Casa, “do not forget to make that investigation I wrote you about in my previous letters about the Countess of Guastalla, and to inform us.” On February 7, Farnese insists on the subject and with more resolute words, always to Della Casa: “Regarding the Countess of Guastalla, Your Lordship can proceed right on, I mean without dispute etc., but only to show that, as a woman, it is not proper for her to go around, so that without stopping here or there, under that profession, she would follow her vocation.”

The Nuncio, who was busy with many other matters, did not forget about the Countess Torelli, who at that time was involved together with Fr. Jerome Marta, with the house for “spinsters in danger” (later called of “The Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary”), with the cooperation of many ladies from the Venetian nobility: Elena Priuli, Paola Donato, Isabella Grimani, Lucrezia Marini, Adriana Contarini, Marietta Dolce, etc., not always with agreeable husbands. The Countess, anyway, while facing peremptory orders from Rome, had no intention to lose a so promising vocational field, and intended to appeal to Senator Francis Sfondrati, who had already helped her for the sale of the fief, and who had been made Cardinal by Paul III a few months before; but she did not make the appeal because Sfondrati was busy in Germany with more serious matters. Rome, however, did not give in, and so Cardinal Farnese, on March 14, was asking again the Nuncio for the removal of Torelli from Venice: “The Countess of Guastalla has not written otherwise to the Cardinal Sfondrati; therefore, since this excuse could be used to waste time in the meantime, it will be good for Your Lordship not to stop in exhorting her to go back to Milan; and if Your Lordship believes that mentioning to her that you have been commissioned by Our Lord would convince her to return home, you should not miss to add this further element to make her do so.”

The Countess leaves Venice

We do not know if the Nuncio used, or not, the reference to the papal authority to convince Torelli to leave Venice, but he did most probably, because at the end of February the Countess seemed ready to leave. She was asking only for a little time to “finish a good work,” which was the reform of the house for the converted. Cardinal Farnese now shows more gentleness: “The Countess of Guastalla has made us understand,” he wrote on March 21, to Della Casa, “that it is in her heart to return to Milan, but that at first she desires to bring to good conclusion a good work she had started there in, I do not know which monastery; a thing which will not take too many days. Then, Your Lordship can proceed with more moderation in the execution of what I wrote to you in my latest, that is, to use the name of His Holiness, because if she decides to leave on her own it is much better.”

So far we do not have documents to clarify the position taken later by Torelli; but as she saw herself under a constant surveillance, which was endangering her very charitable or vocational activity in Venice, she decided to leave the city within the year. At the same time, Rome showed patience: the last mention in Cardinal Farnese’s correspondence of April 11, 1545, shows that the case is about resolved, and so no need of further initiatives: “Your Lordship, deal with the Countess of Guastalla according to what we wrote previously.”

Some more clarifications

It is clear that the reprimand from Rome against the Countess, was against her public preaching in various cities, and also the fact that she was a woman: “as a woman it is not proper for her to go around,” Cardinal Farnese wrote, and he was pressing Della Casa to “reprimand her not to continue, as a woman, on this road around cities and villages.” This insistence on the fact that she was a woman, was aiming at adding a discriminating element in the group of the “Paulines,” as the Barnabites were called in Venice, almost as to create a clear division between men and women in a religious cenacle still in formation, as was the one of the Angelics and the Barnabites. Among them, cooperation between the sexes was not so much tolerated as welcomed, neither less nor more than what was done in other new religious families, for example Caterina Cybo and Vittoria Colonna for the Capuchins, Giacomina Pallavicino and Giulia Zerbino for the Jesuits. By limiting the space of public activity around the Countess, and by confining her in “her” monastery in Milan and to cloistral life, (which she will never accept), the Roman Curia was aiming to gradually normalize the life of the Paulines, with a new rigid separation which would guide the life of the two branches, the men (the Barnabites) and the women (the Angelics). If they had understood this crafty maneuver as an omen of a climate of inevitable change, perhaps it would have been possible to contain the excessive power of Angelic Paola Antonia Negri. As a “woman” she was going behind the limits allowed in the community life of the Paulines. This will cause later the Venetian ban of 1551, the holding of Fathers Melso and Besozzi in the Inquisition prisons in Rome in 1552, and the humiliating apostolic visit to the Motherhouse in Milan, ordered in the fall of the same year. But in 1545, among Barnabites and Angelics, notwithstanding some difficulties, the charismatic call to “apostolic life” was still very strong and deep rooted, and their eyes were fixed on the “Madonna” (Torelli) and on the “Divine Mother Mistress” (Negri), who was allowed not only to preach, but also to be a spiritual director, to have the final word in important matters, and quite a decisional role about the future of the Barnabite family. It is undeniable that at that time, especially because other ties with the “common Father” Fra Battista da Crema, her recognized “magisterium” by the same initiator of the Barnabites, and besides the financial help she was still offering to the young Pauline institutes, the Countess of Guastalla was enjoying among them a prestigious role. Consider the words about Torelli written by a person from outside, the famous literary man, Cornelio Frangipane, to Fr. Paolo Melso: “I am very sorry for not being able to go to Venice during this Holy Week, and to greet that illustrious and truly divine Madonna (Torelli),” words which for sure were appreciated by the Barnabite.

Considering these events, we could ask if the repeated directives of Cardinal Farnese against Torelli were aiming only at her wandering preaching, or instead, through the severe restrictive injunctions were meant to remove from Venice the Barnabites who were working with her. Anyway, this was what Torelli had clearly suspected (if we want to believe Angelic Paola Antonia Sfondrati): “She felt that the coming of this storm was caused by her, as time will better show.”

“Guastallian Priests”

It is a given fact that generally (also in the Venetian territories), at least until the middle of the 1500’s, the Clerics Regular of St. Paul were identified with the religious “leanings” of the Countess, to the point that they were called even as “Guastallian Priests,”

“Priests of the Guastalla Lady,” “The sect of the Countess of Guastalla,” the “Guastallians”; and naturally this was happening a fortiori for the Angelics. It could be, then, that one of the intentions of Rome was to stop, together with the action of the Countess in Venice, also the one of her “followers,” the Barnabites. They, without her valuable support, and especially after her sudden departure, would have very little hope for any success.

Unexpected injunction

Fear of heretical infiltrations and concerns for political peace and order were reasons enough for Rome and Venice to agree to remove the Countess and her “sect” from the city. That “divine fire” which animated them, jeopardized both the established religious structures and the tight political bonds of the Venetian nobility. This episode could exemplify the “substantial agreement” between church and state interested in enforcing religious conformity and effective discipline through the use of Inquisition or its threat.

Before they could defend themselves, both Barnabites and Angelics were banned from the Republic. The Sisters and Clerics were deeply saddened by this unexpected injunction which cut short many undertakings. They immediately wrote to Milan to ask how they should behave in this emergency. Even in Milan the news was received with great astonishment and regret. Not able to understand the cause of such ignoble treatment and unfair compensation for the good accomplished and the efforts exerted, the community at once decided to accept it, although many influential persons had offered to intervene.

Apostolic visit

As a consequence there was an apostolic visit by Bishop Leonard Marini who, among other things, imposed the cloister to the Angelics.

Father Besozzi was sent to Rome with Father Melso to counteract the Venetian calumnies, aided by Cardinal Sfrondati, who sought to influence the apostolic visitors whose task was to bring some light on the happenings in Venice.

When the two fathers arrived in Rome, they found that the “judges against heresy” were unfavorably impressed by them. They decided to surrender themselves spontaneously and requested that they be given a regular trial to end the doubts. Once their petition was received, they were both imprisoned at the beginning of January 1552, accused of being followers of Fra Battista da Crema’s doctrine, considered dangerous. Furthermore, they were accused of too much familiarity with the sisters and excessive deference to Sr. Negri.

When the Countess reached Milan, she heard of the fathers’ imprisonment. Concerned for them, she sent a person she trusted, the attorney Matthew Daverio, with the twofold mission of obtaining their release and of keeping her informed of the proceedings of the trial.

Daverio, with the help of Basil Ferrari and Cardinal Archinto succeeded in finding out the accusations against the fathers, and eventually also in obtaining their release.

The condemnation

Cardinal Carafa was concerned about the innovative spirit which was characterizing the company. Since the idea of a female community which cooperated with and

complemented the apostolate of a male one, was not only new but risky. This was all that was necessary to arouse suspicion in a man with the temperament of the future pope Paul IV.

He immediately decided to abolish completely the association of the Fathers with the Sisters allowing only “two” Fathers for confession and the celebration of Mass in the Monastery of St. Paul.

He also established that the two Congregations thus separated were to have a Cardinal Protector who was to see that they followed the directives of the Holy Office. Cardinal Alvarez of Toledo did not want to accept since he had been especially forewarned about the Sisters, but “Everything has gone well because the Pope and the inquisitors have constrained St. James (Alvarez) to accept and thus everything is settled.”

Torelli could not accept these arrangements and hesitated over the pressure of Daverio who was trying to persuade her, for the good of the religious family, to place herself in the hands of the protector and write a letter to this end. Finally Daverio realized he had two powerful allies: Julia Sfrondati and the Princess of Molfetta. The Countess was persuaded to cede and after her letter of acceptance, Alvarez, together with the inquisitors, deemed it opportune to order a visit of the two monasteries.

They named Bishop Bernard Diaz de Luco of Calahorra as Apostolic Visitor. Since he was busy, he named the suffragan Bishop of Mantua, to whom he gave the principal norms to be introduced into the reform.

Results of the visit

The Apostolic visit of the Monasteries of St. Paul and St. Barnabas took place in October of 1552. The measures suggested by Daverio in his letters to the Countess were implemented. The first injunction made by the visitor was, “we prescribe that no one probe, or read the writings or remains of Fra Battista da Crema nor follow his doctrine, condemned by the very reverend and illustrious cardinals, general inquisitors.” His books had, in fact, already been included in the Index.

Another injunction of the Visitor was to bury Fra Battista’s body. Moreover, it forbade absolutely all familiarity between the Sisters and the Barnabites. Only one Father was allowed to remain as confessor to the sisters but he was not permitted any interference. To avoid any contact between the two Congregations, he was to reside in a reserved apartment at St. Paul’s, and he was exonerated from any dependence from his superiors.

It gave orders that no one was to acknowledge any authority in Sr. Negri. She was ordered to leave the convent of St. Paul and to retire with a willing companion to the Monastery of St. Clare in Milan. Finally as a general precaution it imposed on the Sisters the requested clostration.

Torelli’s detachment

The Countess was hurt by the condemnation of Fra Battista whom she never ceased to venerate as a saint, and she could not find the necessary calm to consider events a little more objectively. She had a strong feeling that things in Rome had not been done with the honesty she had hoped for, but that they had tried to shift all the blame on Fra Battista and the absent Sr. Negri. As though this was not enough, she saw discord creeping into the institute which had already cost her so many struggles and hardships. Some Sisters, who had embraced religious life in the spirit of the Founder, refused to accept clostration.

The Ecumenical Council was in full development in Trent and the Church was finally handling the reform which had been demanded for more than fifteen hundred years, and had finally surfaced in thousand of ways and methods which needed now to be directed in a canonical way so that they would not end in anarchy. Before the Trent declarations, the Inquisition had tried to discipline these rampant forces, often sacrificing the genial initiatives of single groups so that they would conform to the traditional schemes of religious life. Also the “Paulines” or “Guastallanes” had to renounce to a lot of their original identity. The Barnabites, being priests, some how managed to continue on their road; but the lay were not considered ripe for the direct apostolate and were sent home to take care of their children and their jobs. The Angelics had to submit to the cloister, and their confessor, Fr. Giovabattista Caimo, was entrusted with the supervision of their monastery with the responsibility of reporting to the Inquisition.

In this rather mortified atmosphere, sooner or later some troubles would arise. Fr. Caimo, going through the registry of the professions, came across a formula written and signed by Torelli. So, had she made a profession of the vows? Was she then an Angelic? Therefore had she to be subjected to the cloister? He asked an explanation from Torelli herself, who answered vaguely, as she was in a hurry to go out of the house.

Simple and private vows

What had happened? Seventeen years before, on January 25, 1537, the first group of Angelics had professed the vows in the hands of St. Anthony M. Zaccaria. Among them there was also Paolantonia Negri, who that day was sick and, at the end of the ceremony, went to bed in her room. Shortly after, out of maternal concern, Torelli followed her to see how she was feeling, and they talked about the ceremony that had just taken place. At a certain point Negri said: *“What a beautiful thing we have done today! My Lady, wouldn’t you like to take part in this joy? Come here, and repeat what I have said and done.”* The Countess knelt and professed the three vows. At that moment, Zaccaria, he too worried about Negri’s health, went into the room and saw the scene. He said: “What have you done?” and he disapproved. Up to here nothing to worry. The problem is that Torelli was so naïve to write the formula of profession in the registry of the professions, which created a problem of conscience for Fr. Caimo.

He presented the case to three moral experts of three different religious Orders: all of them said that those vows were really monastic vows, requiring the cloister. Instead, they were wrong because the canonical profession has to be made in public, after the approval from the Community, and in the hands of the Prioress or the confessor. Negri was only the mistress of novices. When Fr. Caimo reported the judgment of the three moral experts, Torelli rejected the opinion and Fr. Caimo added: *“I will present the case to Rome, and we will do what they say.”*

The case was sent to Rome and the verdict was that the vows were private and simple, not canonical and solemn. But Torelli, terrorized at the idea to be enclosed into the cloister, had the impression that somebody wanted to bury her alive, and that the Barnabites and the Angelics were conniving in this.

The Countess abandons Angelics and Barnabites

On that December 15, 1554, the Countess Torelli, as stated in the “Libro delle cose diverse” of the Monastery, abandoned her own creation, that is, the Community of the Angelic Sisters.” As Fr. Bertelli says, this caused the lack of “any support which, up to then, had been given to the Angelics and our Congregation, rather a long controversy rose between the Countess and the Angelics, which was finally resolved [in 1569] by two referees, that is, for the Countess Father Lionetto, S.J., and for the Angelics Father Alexander Sauli, who was the Superior in St. Barnabas, as shown in a written documents in St. Paul’s.”

Almost ignoring her closeness to Zaccaria, Torelli withdrew her subsidies for the Barnabites too, refusing to help them in their growing financial needs. We can imagine the effects in the public opinion in Milan caused by the separation of the Countess from “her” monastery, which only two years before she so adamantly had defended against her own relatives. Her action, which seemed to be caused by her anger against Fr. Caimo, was almost like a denial of her work, or at least as a decisive separation of herself from the Pauline family.

Fr. Premoli tried to make up their relationship saying that the good relationship between the Countess and the Angelics was not interrupted, but we know that the painful situation was protracted until 1569, as shown by a document found recently in the Milan State archives, where, among other things, the Sisters emphasize: “always, although given to them, they have never taken as their own anything, but they have always allowed her to do things in her own way, not daring to contradict her. And so for all the time she had been with them they had known nothing else but what she wanted, never complaining about the living conditions, the clothes, and so many efforts and vigils done for what was happening around her, and those who were under her, as you well know, kept serving her like daughters and slaves, seeing as if only through her eyes.”

Barnabites and Angelics in vain tried to reach her and explain to her the situation: she did not want to have anything to do with them. Deceived by false friends, “*lay and religious of both sexes*” the historians say) who were sending her documents and letter falsely created, she became the victim of a plot, and not of a disinterested help. “*She was badly counseled*,” Paola Antonia Sfondrati, one of the four sisters Torelli had welcomed in her monastery in 1528, says in her *Historia*. “*Badly counseled*” by whom? Malicious people say by the Jesuits, with whom Torelli will end up. Instead no, because in 1554 the Jesuits had not arrived in Milan as yet. For sure this was a very hard moment for everybody, caused by slanderers who were only interested in clouding the waters.

When the truth became clear, all became aware of the stupidity of so much suffering and pain, but by then Torelli had made her decision.

The Guastalla College

After few days spent at the house of Isabella di Capua, wife of the Governor of Milan, Ferrante Gonzaga, Torelli moved to the monastery of the Remisse of the Crucifix, then in a rented house in Porta Vercellina, then in the Brebbi palace. Finally she bought from Matteo delle Quattro Marie a large property only few meters from St. Barnabas, and there she gave rise to the “College of the girls of the Blessed Virgin,” which was called the “Guastalla college” by the people. It was a religious institute but lay in nature, that is, free from any

ecclesiastical jurisdiction and under the direct protection of the King of Spain, Philip II, and his successors. The internal organization was similar to the one of the Angelics. It was inaugurated on November 1, 1557, with a procession again similar the one done by the Angelics when they transferred from the house nearby St. Ambrose to the one in St. Eufemia: 20 matrons, each accompanying a girl from a previously noble family but not anymore, entered the new institute destined to about 22-25 girls. They were dressed in white with a deep blue overall, a black leather belt, just like the Angelics, and a white bonnet on their head. The new pupils, after a period of trial, every year were to receive the habit on September 8. They studied, learned feminine trades, but especially they were committed to Christian life, with the expulsion as penalty in case of failure. They would remain there until they were 22 years old, when they were dismissed with a dowry of 2000 *ducats*, so that they could get married or enter a monastery without any trouble.

The education was a familial type, just as the one of the Barnabites and of the Angelics. The administration was in the hands of some matrons called “governors” who would take the vows of chastity, would practice an intense spiritual life and were swearing in front of a notary public to live and die at the service of the institute. At the head was a Prioress to be elected every two years, with four counselors, also to be elected every two years, like the Angelics. They had a black habit with a golden ring on the left hand, exactly - once again – like the Angelics, with a cross engraved on a heart.

This institute was exceptionally important, because it was the first institute for girls in history. Even before this, girls used to be sent to monastery for their education, but it was completely different! As an institute pedagogically structured, with rules and regulations aiming at an integral preparation of the girls for life, including a dowry, it was really unique in its kind. The institute has survived the centuries. Its place was located exactly in what is still called Via Guastalla, today is housing the Sormani Library. In 1937 it was transferred to the Villa Barbò of San Fruttuoso in Monza, and it is run not any more by the “governors” but by the Sisters Daughters of Christ the King.

The last years of Torelli were marked by suffering. She suffered a deforming arthritis, which eventually forced her to be totally bed-ridden. Nonetheless she lived for her institute always very interested and offering everything for it. And when St. Charles Borromeo, as he heard of her illness, came to visit her and to give her his pastoral blessing, thinking that he was coming to forced her to put the institute under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction, she had the force to jump sitting on the bed begging the Saint not to touch that subject. But when Borromeo, smiling, explained to her that he come only to give her the comfort of his blessing, assuring her to her institute would have been always the way she had wanted it, she laid down again on the bed in the midst of her pains.

She died on October 28, 1569, and was buried in St. Fidelis, not exactly they way she had wanted in her last will. Now her remains, together with the institute, have been moved to San Fruttuoso in Monza, next to the girls she keeps loving and protecting, as her name has been inscribed in the Catalogue of the Blessed and Saints of the Ambrosian Church, published about twenty years after her death.

We would dare to say that Torelli too, together with the three co-founders, were born at the wrong time. Too early in time? We had to wait for our times and the Vatican Council II to see some of their proposed as absolute novelties some of their ideas so mortified in the 1500's: the universal vocation to holiness, the ecclesial maturity of the laity, the preciousness of the woman in the apostolate, the missionary vocation of all the baptized. When Torelli run

the risk to finish her days in the cloister, she did not retreat or run North of the Alps like all the unhappy Catholics, instead she embarked by herself on the very personal road to the very end with an extreme lucidity. Yes, with some sadness, as she could not trust anymore the people of the Church, she opted to be under the protection of the lay authority, but inside guided by the deepest of religious feelings as, after all, she was still trusting the Church.

With the Barnabites and the Angelics she was always a good mother, but she had formed already another family of her own. Often she was going to the monastery of the Angelics, to visit her dear daughters, and with deep emotions she would regret to have acted too impulsively and to have listened too much to deceiving voices, but grateful to God for good she was still doing and her institute was going to do in the future. The Barnabites used to go to visit her in her illness, rehashing the happy days when together they had built God's house, and she maternally would scold them for not visit her too often, a sign that her heart was still with them.